

Assessing Public Support for the Gifted

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In order to assess the public's attitudes, perceptions, and awareness of programs for the gifted, surveys of public opinion have been used to determine the level of public support (Karnes & Riley, 1997; Larsen, Griffin, & Larsen, 1994). Surveys may investigate a variety of groups, including parents, teachers, administrators, and the noned-

ucational sector, including the general public. Additionally, representation from all socioeconomic and educational levels should be sought in the survey to determine potential audiences for future public relations

efforts based on the results of the study. Results from these surveys can be utilized to benefit gifted programming. They provide quantitative support from state citizens endorsing the need for gifted students to be identified and served, which is vital information when schools, districts, or states begin looking for areas to cut budgets.

In 1997, Karnes and Riley documented the results of a public opinion poll of respondents in Mississippi that demonstrated general agreement with the “need for specialized programs for gifted children” (p. 238). Likewise, Larsen, Griffin, and Larsen (1994) conducted a national survey of public opinion regarding programs for gifted children and found strong support for such programs. Wilson (1994) surveyed the public in Arkansas and found positive attitudes toward gifted education programs, but little awareness among the general public about the types of specialized programs offered to gifted students.

A recent Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools revealed the consensus that “most students achieve only a small part of their full academic potential in school” (Lowell, 2000, p. 41). While the Gallup poll offers insights into the public’s general conception of how well public schools are helping our students achieve their potential, specific issues pertaining to gifted education have not been addressed in similar large-scale nationwide polls.

In Canada, however, public opinion about programs for the gifted has been the subject of a survey (Grayson & Hall, 1992). Results of this poll of residents of Ontario, Canada, show varying degrees of support toward educating the gifted, with the majority of respondents giving qualified support for gifted programs, 19% giving no support, and only 13% giving full support. Socioeconomic factors, including educational attainment and income level, appeared to indicate support for gifted programming among this survey group.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine public support for gifted education in the state of Mississippi. The

information garnered from the survey was used to inform the general public and specific groups as to the degree of support held for the public education of gifted children and youth.

Methodology

The 21-question instrument was based on one from a previous study (Karnes & Riley, 1997). The original was developed with assistance from professionals in gifted education at the local, state, and national levels. Questions were generated and rank ordered by those serving on the board of the state association for gifted education. The highest ranked questions were written in a statement format. A Likert-type scale was established for the response mode. Minimal changes were made to the original survey with permission from the authors.

Sample

A random sample was drawn to represent the entire state of Mississippi. In interpreting survey results, it should be kept in mind that all sample surveys are subject to sampling error—the extent to which the results would differ from what would be obtained if the whole population had been interviewed. This range of tolerance or “margin of statistical error” is due to the laws of probability and chance. The size of such error depends largely on the sample selection procedure and the sample size. Given a random sample of 358 telephone households in this study, a probability-based sampling procedure, and 95% confidence level, the survey has a margin of error of $\pm 5.18\%$.

Procedure

The survey was conducted by trained telephone surveyors not involved

in gifted education during a 1-week period of time. The people conducting the interviews were given written directions to read to the respondents and were trained by a professor of marketing at a local university.

Hello. My name is _____. I’m calling from the University of _____. We are doing a statewide survey of people’s views on public education for gifted students. Will you help us by answering some questions? Thank you.

I’m going to read you a number of statements about gifted students. Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each statement. (Interviewer: Ask the respondent if he or she strongly agrees or just agrees or if he or she strongly disagrees or just disagrees.)

Results

Fifty-eight percent surveyed were female (see Table 1). The majority of those responding were White (68.8%). The total household incomes with the highest representation were those in the \$25,000–34,999 range (20.2%). The most highly represented age range was 35 to 45 years of age (21.3%). The education level most highly represented was graduation from college (28.2%). More than half of those responding (56.2%) personally knew a gifted child (see Table 1 for demographic data).

Respondents were in agreement on the needs and rights of gifted children. A large majority of respondents (86.3%) strongly agreed that gifted students have different educational needs than average or below-average students. Similarly, 63.8% agreed that gifted children and youth should have the same legal protections as students with dis-

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abilities. Respondents also strongly agreed (71.6%) that the education of gifted students in the state should have a high priority.

Support was not only shown for the need for programs, but also for the provisions of those programs. Of the respondents, 91.8% agreed that public schools should be required to have special instructional programs to help gifted students reach their potential, with 69.3% expressing that these programs should begin at the preschool level. A majority (67.1%) supported the opportunity to skip grades if a student can demonstrate mastery of educational material, and 64.8% supported socially mature gifted students entering kindergarten early. An even larger majority (85.8%) strongly agreed that gifted students should be allowed to complete above-grade-level coursework if they have demonstrated content mastery at their current grade level. Residential schools were viewed as a possible option for serving gifted students, with 44% expressing support for public residential schools for elementary students and 42.4% supporting public residential high schools. Respondents also strongly agreed that all teachers should receive special training in educating gifted students (71.1%).

Respondents were also in agreement about how these programs should be funded. A majority (67.4%) agreed that the state legislature should provide more funds to educate gifted students in specialized programs in public schools to meet their educational needs. Approximately 74.1% of those surveyed strongly agreed that small school districts in the state should join together to pool resources in order to provide appropriate services for gifted students.

In looking at economic growth and development, 65.5% of respondents agreed that business and industry outside Mississippi would be more inter-

Table 1 Participant Profile		
Variable		Percent
Gender	Male	42.0
	Female	58.0
Race	Asian American	2.8
	African American	24.7
	Hispanic	0.8
	Native American	0.8
	White	68.8
	Other	2.0
Income	Less than \$10,000	5.4
	\$10,000 to \$24,999	11.6
	\$25,000 to \$34,999	20.2
	\$35,000 to \$49,999	19.9
	\$50,000 to \$74,999	14.2
	\$75,000 or more	9.4
	Refused	19.3
Age	18–24	12.4
	25–34	18.8
	35–44	21.3
	45–54	20.5
	55–64	11.8
	65+	13.2
	refused	2.0
Education	Less than high school	8.7
	High School graduate	20.8
	Some college or technical school	26.5
	College graduate	28.2
	Some postgraduate	5.4
	Postgraduate degree	6.5
	Refused	3.9

ested in locating in the state if good educational programs for the gifted were provided in public schools. Support was also given to the idea of business and

industry within the state giving financial support to public schools for instructional programming for gifted students (64.3% agreement). Sixty-two percent

agreed that the economic growth and development of the state depends on educating gifted students to their fullest potential. However, 67.9% agreed that gifted students, rather than average or below-average students, are more likely to leave the state upon completion of high school and college.

Respondents held similar views about who gifted children are and where they can be found. A large majority strongly agreed (86.3%) that gifted students are in families at all socioeconomic levels, and 87.5% strongly agreed that gifted students may be in an economically depressed rural environment or in an affluent urban area. Ninety-one percent also strongly agreed that gifted students could be found in every ethnic and racial group. Respondents only offered 29.1% agreement with the statement that proportionally there are fewer gifted students in Mississippi than in any other state.

Discussion

The data indicate that the majority of the public in Mississippi recognizes the importance of gifted education, as well as the need to assist schools financially in developing specialized programs to serve gifted children. This support for gifted children is stronger than the 60% positive response found by Larsen et al. (1994). Findings of the current survey were disseminated across the state of Mississippi through press releases to newspapers and key decision makers, including Mississippi State Department of Education personnel and legislators.

Based on the results of the current survey, efforts to inform the public of the benefits of residential schools for the gifted should be an area of future concern. Forty-two percent of respondents indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed that the state should have special residential high schools for the gifted.

Proponents of residential high schools for the gifted may have to target the general public in future public relations efforts in order to inform them of the benefits of the School for Math and Science, a special state residential school serving 11th- and 12th-grade students, and the future School of the Arts, a state residential school serving gifted secondary students in grades 11 and 12. Public relations efforts may focus on benefits the state can reap as a result of these programs for gifted students. Current survey results indicate little change in opinions toward elementary and secondary residential schools for the gifted from a few years ago, when respondents were asked a similar question (Karnes & Riley, 1997). In 1997, 48% of respondents indicated they strongly agreed or agreed that Mississippi should have special residential elementary schools for gifted students. In 2002, 44% of respondents indicated support. Similarly, when given a statement regarding support for special residential high schools for the gifted, 55% of the 1997 respondents indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed, while 42% of the 2002 respondents indicated strong agreement or agreement with this statement.

Likewise, as other advocates undertake similar efforts to gauge the support for gifted programs in their states or nationwide, careful analysis of the results can greatly assist in the strategic planning of future public relations efforts. Advocates and other supporters of gifted education can glean from the results specific areas for future efforts and create specific plans to address those needs. Additionally, follow-up studies every 5 years can indicate how successful such public relations efforts have been in addressing the identified areas. Efforts to gauge public support should be undertaken at the state and national levels to determine the views of the general pub-

lic toward gifted education programs and services.

The results of public opinion polls can also be used as documentation for continued financial support for gifted programs at the local, state, and national levels. Having quantifiable data to relate to decision makers in public office can help illustrate the need for financial support for such programs.

Local, state, and national opinion can also be influenced by the timely release of the results of surveys. Newspaper articles, op-ed pieces, Web sites, fact sheets, and other media can assist advocates of gifted education in reaching a variety of audiences and promoting the need for and benefits of gifted programs (Karnes & Riley, 1997).

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